

ARTICLE APPROVED
ON PAGE 10A

PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER
4 June 1983

Soviets disband Krishna group, magazine reports

By Alison Smale
Associated Press

MOSCOW — Authorities have broken up a Hare Krishna sect here and have punished two of its leaders, a weekly magazine reported yesterday. It warned other citizens of the officially atheist Soviet Union not to dabble in such "ideological diversions."

The report in Nedelya magazine was the first word that a Hare Krishna group had been set up in the capital and also marked a rare official acknowledgement that some Soviets have been attracted to Oriental-style mysticism instead of communism.

According to Nedelya, the sect here was started under the guidance of an American, Robert Campaniola, whom the magazine described as a "former CIA man" specializing in ideological propaganda.

After the group was uncovered, the magazine said, members Vladimir Kritsky, 32, and Sergei Kurkin, 25, were tried and convicted of propagating "strongly anti-communist teachings." Nedelya said they were sentenced but did not say what the punishment was.

The article ended with a call for an "uncompromising struggle" against "ideological diversions" like the Hindu-derived ideology espoused by the Hare Krishna sect.

Such stories, which often link the CIA to illegal activities, are common in the state press and clearly are intended to warn citizens away from religious groups, peace movements that lack official approval, and other nonconformist phenomena.

The tone of the article also reflected two principles said to be emphasized by Communist Party leader Yuri V. Andropov — the need for rigid adherence to orthodox communism and exposure of weaknesses in Soviet life.

Formally called the International Society for Krishna Consciousness Inc., and famous for the saffron-robed faithful who beg at airports and other public places, Hare Krishna says it has hundreds of thousands of members in 35 countries.

It was founded in New York in 1965 and takes its name from the Hindu deity Krishna, said to have been the eighth incarnation of the god Vishnu.

Nedelya began its 2,000-word story with a description of Campaniola sitting in a Moscow apartment dressed in white robes and receiving the adoration of his followers.

It went on to contend that the section was doing "pathological damage" to the mental health of three other group members, identified only as Slava S., Yura K. and Lena P.

Nedelya described the case of Lena P. at length, saying she was a top student at Moscow's prestigious Sports Institute until her involvement with Hare Krishna made her "unbalanced."

"She began showing hatred for her parents," the magazine said, adding that she refused meat, fish, eggs and other foods, "tormenting herself with a daily fast and... constantly murmuring some unintelligible words."

The cautionary tale ended with Lena's expulsion from the Sports Institute and with her mother dying, having been rejected by her daughter.

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